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Realism and Ritual in the Italian Short Stories of Edith Wharton

Robin Peel

1 This essay explores the tension between scientific rationalism and aspects of religion in Wharton's Italian short fiction. If Wharton's novels of social realism explore the secular complexities of the social order imposed by Old New York conventions, an important strand in her Italian stories explores the implications for conduct of the invisible order that we label religion. Although in Edith Wharton's short stories the presence of Italy provides a metonymy for an aesthetic response to history, art and architecture as "The Daunt Diana" (1909) shows, at play in these texts is another, more powerful discourse connoting a fascination with the signification of Christianity, whether in the form of its apparatus of church and priest, the enactment of ritual, or the myths and mysteries to which these symbols point. This fascination emerged in Wharton's formative years of early childhood and early youth but was overshadowed by the unexpectedly productive return on her decision around 1902 to take the advice of friends such as Walter Berry and Henry James to focus in her longer fiction on contemporary America and Americans. The commercial success that immediately followed the publication of *The House of Mirth* in 1905 helped determine the focus of future fiction, especially her novels. Marriage and modernity became her subject. The nurturing and revival of an interest in Italy, a Catholic country, comes as a surprise only if we ignore the possibility that rule-bound Catholicism served as a necessary replacement for the rule-bound Old New York society that Wharton had left behind.

2 Wharton's mature espousal of a rational and scientific epistemology was nurtured by her close friends Egerton Winthrop and Walter Berry and her reading of Darwin and Herbert Spencer. It is a development reflected indirectly in most of her longer fiction, with its sharp exposure of the contradictions and restraints imposed by class, gender and money on human types regarded as evolutionary *species*. Her "grand tour" engagement with medieval and post-medieval Italian church art ensured that her curiosity about a world unmeasured by science continued to be stimulated, however. During this pre-World War I period, an undercurrent of interest in the uncanny and the

figure of the spiritual enquirer resurfaces in the fiction, an interest which provides a connection between the Italian short stories and ghost stories such as "Afterward" (1910). Recognition of the importance of this current, and its appearance in the poetry written at the time of the affair with Morton Fullerton, makes Wharton's return to the mysteries and ritual of the Roman church in the final years of her life much easier to comprehend. Her Italian short stories provide more than a glimpse of the Wharton for whom Italy satisfied not just an aesthetic and cultural need, but a spiritual one.

3 Importantly, Wharton's pre-World War I Italian stories explore the latent spiritual strand suppressed or neglected in her longer fiction after *The Valley of Decision* (1902)—sometimes in a historical, and sometimes in a contemporary setting. Her later, post-World War I, stories do not exhibit the same tension between secular politics and metaphysics, partly because by then Wharton was no longer suppressing her leanings towards Catholic ritual. Ostensibly this difference is reflected in a change in the stories over time. "Souls Belated" (1898) is a more anxious story than "Roman Fever" (1936), where the tone is poignant and the painful events long past. But an early Italian story "A Venetian Night's Entertainment" (1903) is light and without any suggestion of enduring psychological pain, whilst Wharton's very last story "All Souls'" (1937), though not Italian, evokes all the terrors of isolation and an apparent manifestation from the world beyond the grave. In this final story, where concerns nurtured in Italy are transmuted into New England gothic, the issue of what happens to souls after death haunts the narrative.

4 The encounter between modernity and religious belief, the subject of Wharton's first published novel, *The Valley of Decision*, is explored most clearly in the Italian short story "The House of the Dead Hand" (*Atlantic Monthly XCIV* August 1904). The story is set in Siena, and is steeped in the iconography of Italian art suffused with the language of religion. Dr Lombard, an expatriate art collector who has reputedly acquired a missing Leonardo from a farmhouse in Bergamo, is a "mystic" and "devout" student of the Italian Renaissance (520). His daughter Sybilla, who is the actual owner of the painting, is a "votary of the arts" (525). There is a recurring tension between this language of the transcendental and the sublime and the language of science, technology and the rational. This tension is further complicated by the suggestion of incest, so that the transcendental and sublime are intoxicated by a transgressive, but concealed sexual element. Wharton has a Hawthorne-like interest in veiling in her Italian short fiction and in this story hints at the way ritualised, suggestive acts take place in secret places or involve something veiled, as in the paintings in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Jennie Kassanoff (66-67) has discussed the way in which the female hand, which gives the story its title, is introduced in phallic terms [the "dead drooping" sallow marble hand "thrust forth" (522) from above the door] and hints at "some evil mystery" (522) which might take place inside the house. Kassanoff notes the description of Gus Trenor's phallic hand in *The House of Mirth*, and the more explicit signal of the incestuous father's name for his penis (his "third hand") in the pornographic manuscript fragment with its Italian sounding character "Beatrice Palmato"[1] whose surname also suggests a hand. The cool, detached rhetoric of Wyant, the rational, intellectual narrator, contrasts with these sinister allusions to taboo practices.

5 In "The House of the Dead Hand", Wyant, who has come to report on the painting for a friend, is hoping to capture the painting in a photograph. Before he is allowed to see the picture, he learns that the art collector's wife prefers Frith's *Railway Station*, that

popular, busy, late-Victorian celebration of trains and travellers. Technology provides an otherwise unlikely link between the serious Wyant and the foolish Mrs. Lombard. In contrast, the showing of the painting is conducted in an extravagantly reverential and theatrically religious way. Before it is unveiled, Miss Lombard "began to recite St Bernard's invocation to the Virgin in the thirty-third canticle of the *Paradise*" (526). As the curtains draw back, Wyant (like the reader) has been primed to expect a "sacred object" (526). Yet the painting contains the same contrasting tensions as the story. There are religious strands, most notably the crucified Christ "on a lonely peak" (527), but the central figure is a Circe-like figure with golden hair "beneath a veil" (527), holding an inverted skull into which a young Dionysus pours wine, while "at the lady's feet lay the symbols of art and luxury: a flute and a roll of music, a platter heaped with grapes and roses [...] and a bowl overflowing with coins and jewels" (527). "*Lux Mundi*," the motto, is surely an ironic reference to Holman Hunt's 1855 picture of Christ with the lantern. We need to remind ourselves of Wharton's remark about the importance of "Italian Backgrounds," which gives the crucifixion scene an importance that its position in the picture does not seem to warrant. Yet in this section of the story all the religious references are shot through with irony. Dr Lombard tells his visitor that Sybilla "has chosen what Catholics call the higher life" and that "this room is a chapel, the sight of that picture a sacrament" (527-8). Sybilla is "blessed" (528). The daughter then delivers an analysis of the painting, noting the figure's Mona Lisa-like left hand, the painting's "mystic rose" and the symbols of eternity (528), but Wyant can see that she is reciting. Because *Lux Mundi* is not part of the script, she cannot explain it. Exaggerated reverence for art *is* a religion, in other words, and it is that mannered substitution that the narrative mocks, not the inner religious experience.

6 The visit ends in a confrontation between Lombard and Wyant, when the latter broaches the subject of the photograph. The thought of attempting to form some kind of base reproduction of a work of unfathomable beauty enrages Lombard. Wyant leaves, and goes straight to a church to view another painting, this time of St. Catherine, in the evening light. Once again painting and more earthly mysteries become entwined, as Wyant discovers he has unwittingly become the go-between and carrier of letters between Sybilla and Count Ottaviano Celsi, who suddenly confronts him in the church. From here on the story becomes a narrative of acute social, not religious, analysis. Much fun is had at the expense of Mrs. Lombard's Englishness, her conventionality, and her aunts, all treated with a sharp irony reminiscent of Jane Austen or Dickens. The conclusion of the tale is much more disturbing. Sybilla is not released from her tyrannical father's custody when he dies, but is condemned to a perpetual psychological paralysis, frozen into inactivity. The dead hand directs female behaviour from beyond the grave, its deadness a vacuous reverence for art that willingly sacrifices human relationships. Social realism and sombre perversion intermingle.

An Italian History

7 Wharton learnt Italian at an early age and as an adult wrote and read widely in the language. She also read deeply *about* Italian history and culture, studying, for example, Jacob Burckhardt's *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* and John Addington Symonds's *The Renaissance in Italy*. Although she loved both Roman and Renaissance art,

aesthetically and historically she was most drawn to seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth-century Italy. During this period the peninsula evolved from a Mediaeval group of contesting city states to the independent Italy of 1861, unified only a year before her birth. In the years leading up to the French Revolution, the Italian states saw ideas from the Enlightenment coming into collision with despotism, particularly in Tuscany. It was this reforming, revolutionary period that particularly interested Wharton. *The Valley of Decision* is a historical novel set in Italy precisely during the period before the French Revolution. As carefully researched as George Eliot's Florence-based historical novel *Romola* (1863), its subject is the complex—sometimes complementary, sometimes antagonistic—relationship between reason and religion, both of which are equally necessary as far as the novel is concerned. This long, historical, *bildungsroman* anticipates and can be read as a revealing "Italian background"[2] to the Italian short fiction. The novel unfolds in the context of opposing historical forces, representing the old and the new worlds. The protagonist Odo is nurtured by the conservative forces of church and state, by the Jesuits and the old aristocracy. In Turin, however, he encounters the new transalpine philosophy originating in the France of Rousseau, the *Encyclopedia* and Voltaire. In exploring how these cultural and political tensions commingle in the person of Odo, the book reflects the similar schism in Wharton's psyche and anticipates her later suspicion of modernism. Like Wharton, who was attracted by science and technology and frustrated by the Old New York conventions, Odo is excited by the new ideas but is divided because as a child he was moved by church frescoes of Franciscans, and it was his dream to become a Franciscan himself. This epistemological conflict is played out more concisely in many of Wharton's Italian short stories—at first playfully. "A Venetian Night's Entertainment" (1903), a reminiscence of the eighteenth century, is a family tale related by Judge Anthony Bracknell to entertain his grandson. Venice may be exotic for the adventurous young Tony Saulsbee, but it is also a dangerous place for an American Protestant. Tony is prepared to see the Mediterranean in religious terms, for his Uncle Richard Saulsbee had brought back from his travels pictures of "heathen mosques and palaces" and "turbaned infidels." When his ship finally docks, Tony immediately becomes the victim of an elaborate confidence trick set in train by a group disguised for Carnival, with a beautiful young woman as the bait. Young Tony is dealt a humiliating lesson. Magic is seductive, but it can deceive.

8 In her fondness for Italy, Wharton provides evidence of the paradox that characterised much of her life. She was an acute observer of the material world but immersed herself in art. She loathed the American preoccupation with products and hotels, but was an early motor car enthusiast. Italy entered her life for very material reasons, following her father's decision to move the family to Europe to save money during the economic banking crises of the immediate post-Civil War years. However the Italy she recalls in her autobiography *A Backward Glance* is a place of enchantment:

> The chief difference was that the things about me were now not ugly but incredibly beautiful. That old Rome of the mid-nineteenth century was still the city of romantic ruins in which Clive Newcome's "J.J." had depicted the Trasteverina dancing before a *locanda* to the music of a *pifferaro*. I remember through the trailing clouds of infancy, the steps of the Piazza di Spagna thronged with Thackerayan artists' models, and heaped with early violets, daffodils, and tulips; I remember long sunlit wanderings on the springy turf of great Roman villas; heavy coaches of Cardinals flashing in scarlet and gold through the twilight of narrow streets; the

> flowery bombardment of the Carnival procession watched with shrieks of infant ecstasy from a balcony of the Corso. (21)

9 The nostalgic tone continues with further memories of watching the "toy procession of stately barouches and glossy saddle-horses which, on every fine afternoon of winter, carried the flower of Roman beauty and nobility round and round and round the restricting meandering of the hill top," and recollections of "hunting on the slopes of the Palatine for the mysterious bits of blue and green and rosy stone which cropped up through the turf [...] and turned out to be precious fragments of porphyry, lapis lazuli, verde antico and the all the mineral flora of the Place of the Caesars" (21). The delight in the magic of Italy is palpable.

10 Less attractive is the fact that Wharton's love of Italy did not include a love of Italians, for whom she had the disdain so common among the group that identified itself as Anglo-Saxon in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. In a 1903 letter to her childhood friend Daisy Chanler, Wharton writes: "I think sometimes it is almost a pity to enjoy Italy as much as I do, because the acuteness of my sensations makes them rather exhausting; but when I see the stupid Italians I have met here, completely insensitive to their surroundings, & ignorant of the treasures of art and history among which they have grown up, I begin to think it is better to be an American, & bring to it all a mind and eye unblunted by custom."[3] Characters in the Italian stories are not averse to making general observations about the difference between Anglo-Saxons and Italians. Though these comments are often presented ironically, that is not the whole story. In "The House of the Dead Hand" Mrs. Lombard, the silhouette of whose cap "seemed a protest against Continental laxities" complains that "they don't understand toast in Italy" (523). Her husband is moved to observe that "she cannot resign herself to the Italian method of dusting furniture" (524). "The Latin race is rhetorical," observes Colonel Alingdon in "The Letter" (1904), concluding that "fluency and sonority are part of the Italian inheritance." Italy is certainly "Other" to these visitors, and the narrative voice is usually amused rather than troubled by these judgements.[4]

Soul and Society

11 Published in 1898 and one of her first Italian short stories, "Souls Belated" seems an example of social realism, with sharply observed portraits of the English and the Americans abroad. The story starts with two lovers on yet another journey, this one from Bologna via Milan to Hotel Bellosguardo in the Italian lakes, in their flight from the Old New York society that condemns the married Lydia's elopement with the writer Gannett. It anticipates Fussell's theory of travel writing (203) which sees travel as the freedom to realise abroad what you would not do in your own country. "Their wanderings during the year had been like the flight of outlaws, through Sicily, Dalmatia, Transylvania and Southern Italy. Isolation, at first, had deepened the flavor of their happiness, as night intensifies the scent of certain flowers" (104). This story of forbidden fruit and exile is told in quasi religious terms (and Mrs. Cope, who is staying in the hotel with Lord Trevenna, has also "sinned"). As the title suggests, the story is not about sexual infidelity, but about the "soul" and its need for spiritual respectability. Lydia says to her lover "When they asked you to hand the plate in church I was watching you—*you wanted to accept*" (117). The phrase in italics draws attention to the lure and function of conformity and conventionality. Lydia's epiphany has her conclude

that "two people who love each other can be saved from madness only by the things that come between them—children, duties, visits, bores, relations—the things that protect married people from each other. We have been too close together—that has been our sin. We've seen the nakedness of each other's souls." (118) Like Adam and Eve they have become outcasts and victims, now conscious of the controlling intimacy of their own nakedness. Lydia tries to leave Gannett, and one morning he sees her making her way to the steamer office. As he watches, paralysed, from the hotel window, an image of penitential suffering comes to him: "He thought of her as wandering barefoot through a stony waste" (121). One of the passengers who have gathered near the landing is a "snuffy priest" (122). Lydia, also paralysed, fails to board the steamer. The lovers, like characters out of Dante, are condemned to live a life of wandering together, agonised and severed from one another by a sense of what they have lost. It comes as no surprise, then, that in 1899 and 1900 Wharton travelled in Northern Italy in search of more religious shrines of the kind she had found at San Vivaldo, the subject of an essay and chapter in *Italian Backgrounds* (1905).

12 The title of that work comes from the essay in which Wharton argues that it is in the *backgrounds* to Italian paintings of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that we see the real Italy. One of the best insights into Wharton's meditative, introspective side is provided by a story which seems to have been inspired by this sense of the importance of background, "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" (*Scribner's Magazine* 1906), which gave its name to the collection of short stories published in 1908. At first the story appears to be a light, satirical narrative of an eccentric recluse's encounter with the figure he has been taught most to fear, the sinful woman. The figures are allegorical, and the narrative has the feel of one of Aesop's fables, or a tale by the Brothers Grimm. It is to all intents and purposes a narrative in which background has been foregrounded so that secluded or veiled figures in cave or convent are brought out and placed centre stage. The story is set in the distant past (the Hermit's mother was killed by an arquebuse shot as she leaned from a tower) and even the Italian setting, signalled by the Wild Woman's move from the northern Alps to papal Rome and beyond, seems to be treated allegorically. The Hermit and the Wild Woman are not named, and are clearly meant to be regarded as symbols rather than characters of the kind we expect from Wharton's usual social realism. This is apparent in the presentation of an extreme recluse, the "Saint of the Rock" who has withdrawn to the driest and most barren part of the mountain, and sits motionless in contemplation in the full glare of the summer sun or exposed to the icy blasts of the winter wind. The Hermit makes a disastrous visit to pay homage to this sage, during which he is told curtly not to speak. Wharton's mischievous and satirical streak, most evident in a novel such as *The Custom of the Country*, is glimpsed in her ironic rendition of the unexpected rebuff that occurs at the moment of intended reverence. Yet behind the almost Saki-like rhetorical detachment of its treatment of human endeavour, entrapment and distress, lies a profound meditation on the conflict between the spirit and the flesh, the mind and the body. As a boy the Hermit witnessed terrible slaughter and carnage. He was a quiet boy, we are told, and it is hardly surprising that "his happiest moments were when he served mass for the chaplain in the early morning, and felt his heart flutter up and up like a lark, up and up till it was lost in infinite space and brightness" (578). This is a description of the introspective religious impulse which dominates his youth: "Above all, he liked to have time to save his soul" (579). Wharton disguises the seriousness of this meditation on the spirit beneath a detached, sceptical, narrative

voice: "His memory kept good store of prayers and litanies, besides long passages from the Mass and other offices, and he marked the hours of his day with different acts of devotion" (580). Wharton protects herself from the scepticism of the sophisticated reader by adopting this condescending tone but we should not allow it to mislead us. The narrator is troubled by her subject. Might it not be right to withdraw from the world, to give up its pleasures, and cultivate the soul?

13 The Wild Woman faces a very different kind of conflict. When her mother dies she is shut away in a convent, and her entrapment, and the denial of any bodily pleasure, is enforced by the religious order of nuns. When the Abbess learns of her longing to bathe, she orders her "to sleep every night for a month in [her] heavy gown, with a veil upon [her] face" (590). Literally and symbolically parched, desperate for water, she escapes from her cell, sheds veil and gown, and enjoys the sensual pleasure of immersing herself in the tank of water, whose reflection shimmers on the ceiling of her cell. She is eventually caught and punished, but then during an attack by Saracen pirates, escapes to the hills and begins to wander. Her encounters range from the ideological (the heresy of Protestant ideas about the individual's direct contact with God) to the whimsical (wood creatures laying gifts before an idol in a cave she occupies for a time). The conflict between spirituality and sensuality is enacted in the final scene, which sees the triumph of the Wild Woman who dies naked in water, but dies a saint. The Hermit, who discovers her body and is in turn discovered by the villagers who have made a pilgrimage to see her, thinks only of his own reputation, which he fears is now ruined. There is no doubt that the woman, who healed others but did not deny the sensual pleasure of water, is the greater human being. Water is life, and to deny life is to distort the soul. This is clearly a very religious story, which has much to say about Puritanism and about the Catholic Church's attitude to women. Gender is central, but it is less a story about sexuality than an ontological narrative in which metaphysical principles are embodied by man and woman. There is no Lawrentian rhetoric of completeness through sexual union here. Instead the woman is the wiser one and she is on her own. Life, and the body, both of which she represents, are not to be suppressed.

14 Although Wharton endorsed neither modernism[5] nor the New Woman, her Italian short stories show her wrestling with the conundrum of an older religious tradition which brought with it the beauty and spirituality she felt was absent in America and critics such as Nathalia Wright are surely correct in observing that Wharton was one of a generation of writers who saw Italy as a sanctuary from American materialism that nevertheless confined women even more than did the conventions of Old New York. Annette Benert (98) contrasts George Sand's affectionate memories of French Catholic convent life, a reprieve from her dysfunctional family, with Wharton's depiction of Italian convents as places of entrapment for women in both "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" and *The Valley of Decision*. As an American Protestant she might well be expected to have had reservations about convents, but other aspects of Catholic life (the role of priests, for example) are treated in her fiction with more indulgent irony. It is likely that the creator of Lily Bart felt that not all women had Sand's fierce independence, and was thus more critical of those institutions designed to control women, forcing them to be either wives or nuns. Emily Orlando suggests that Wharton's fiction is a sustained critique of the (mis)representation of women, citing, for example, the elements suggesting sexual ecstasy in the Bernini statue commissioned by the jealous husband to entomb her lover in "The Duchess at Prayer."

Such a critique is by no means limited to the Italian fiction, but it is arguable that the influence of Italian Catholicism is traceable in the turn taken in the analysis of womanhood in Wharton's post-World War I novels, where the focus moves to the figure of the mother, a figure that combines the paradoxes and contradictions that intrigued Wharton. Julie Olin-Ammentorp (295-312) argues that the Madonna figure fascinated Wharton for the reasons explored by Julia Kristeva in her essay "Stabat Mater." Catholic dogma surrounding the Virgin Mary may have a politically conservative agenda, but Kristeva identifies a powerful and empowering mythology in the full implications of early Church teaching, which makes the Madonna not only mother, but wife and daughter of Christ, thus embodying a powerful female trinity in one figure (160-186). For Kristeva a politics that recognises some women's continuing desire for motherhood is not provided by the figure of the Virgin, but historically she has provided a focus for such debates, and Benert reads "The Hermit and the Wild Woman" as confirmation of Wharton's investment in the outer journey rather than the inner. In one sense this is true. The Wild Woman travels ceaselessly after escaping the convent (the parallel with Wharton is obvious), does good works, is admired and becomes a saint. But the story is a dialectic, requiring two poles, and anticipates the turn towards the spiritual and the return to the Italian world of Catholicism in the final decades of Wharton's life. The story is clearly linked to the travel piece "What the Hermits Saw" in *Italian Backgrounds*, which had appeared the year before. In this travel sketch Wharton describes the huts, bridges and chapels occupied by anchorites who seek to make connections with the old gods displaced by Christianity. The inner search is the search of the artist and those concerned with the soul should never be ousted by society.

Italian Backgrounds

15 It is helpful to keep returning to Wharton's observation about the importance of background in Italian painting when reading her other Italian stories, whose foreground is often concerned with travelling Americans. Like "Souls Belated," "The Muse's Tragedy" (1908) is concerned with writing and adultery (though in "Souls Belated" a further twist to the punishment is that since their elopement Gannett has been *unable* to write). Once again a hotel by the Italian lakes is the setting for the action, but we learn, through letter or the memory of the well-named Mrs. Memorall, about events elsewhere. Rome is the scene of a theatrical enactment of unrequited love, Venice of fleeting sexual fulfilment. The narrative confirms the impossibility of earthly desire. Mrs. Mary Anerton, the muse and supposed lover of the poet Rendle in Rome, goes to live in Venice after his death. What follows is a subverted story of courtly love. Rendle never loved his supposed muse, and she has spent her life adoring him but being overlooked by him. As a mature woman in her mid-forties, she meets Danyers, a young scholar devoted to the works of Rendle, and discovers that he has actually fallen in love with her. After their initial encounter at the lakeside Hotel d'Este, they spend a month together in Venice, ostensibly to work on a book on Rendle. She then leaves Danyers, so that she can cherish that month for ever. Italy in this story is the setting for unrequited desire, art, and self-denial. It is religious in its treatment of abnegation.

16 In *The Valley of Decision* religion and politics compete on equal terms but in another story of 1904, "The Letter," it is the politics which is foregrounded. This story, like *The Valley of Decision,* advertises the amount of historical research and reading that

Wharton undertook, as Colonel Alingdon relates the complex political context of his devotion to Donna Candida, who loved an ardent Italian nationalist and liberal from Modena during the struggle for Italian independence. By a Hardyesque twist of circumstances this same man had intercepted her brother Emilio's eve-of-execution letter to his mother and sister, and rather than delivering it to the intended recipients betrays them by giving it to the authorities, thus denying them the traditional family solace of the martyr's last words. The story turns on the sophistry of Donna Candida, who convinces herself and persuades Colonel Alingdon that his rival, the nationalist she loves, betrayed her family for honourable reasons. He loved Italy so much that he knew he must do nothing that would endanger his position as a liberal activist. This is politics, and clever, almost Jesuitical in fact, and the rival's devotion to the cause is religious in its intensity. Human beings are victims of this devotion, however, and the mood of the story is sombre.

17 In some stories the Italian background suffocates the narrative. "The Confessional" may have a very religious sounding title, but the first two thirds of the story show how political battles between Lombardy and the ruling Austrians determine the family life of Count Roberto, a nationalist, and his young wife the Countess Faustina, whom he rescues from the lecherous looks of insufferable Austrians, but who supposedly takes an Austrian lover, Franz Welkenstern, the cousin of his half-brother's wife. The political background is sketched in such detail that a political feud seems to be played out as a family feud. Then there is a sudden turn, as the Count persuades his wife's confessor to let him take his place and listen to his wife's confession. Having done so, he publicly exonerates her, even though we suspect that she has confessed to the affair. The Count goes off to fight for Lombardy and Italy. The priest, who is the narrator, is sent to the United States as punishment for betraying his spiritual duty. There, he later encounters the Count, ill and also an exile. He nurses him back to life and the story ends as it has begun, with a political emphasis. The Count spends the remaining eight years of his life lecturing and raising money to support patriots and the Italian cause. Priest and patriot may seem to represent two different threads of Italian life, but what they share, and what Wharton seemed to find attractive, is the certainty, the passion and the authority of those who have definite convictions and values. From the very beginning we are told, with seeming approval and affection, of the absolutism of the enlightened priest. "Among his parishioners Don Egidio ruled with the cheerful despotism of the good priest. On cardinal points he was inflexible, but in minor matters he had that elasticity of judgment which enables the Catholic discipline to fit itself to every inequality of the human conscience. There was no appeal from his verdict." The imposition of order, regulation, ritual and tradition is presented as one way of coping with the darkness of human behaviour.

18 The darkness of the human condition and the cruelty of powerful men are the medieval and modern themes which run through many of these tales of Italy. In "The Duchess at Prayer" (*Scribner's* 1900), we are again in the purely Italian world of *The Valley of Decision*, but here art and religion are subsumed in a Poe-like psychological story of burial alive. The story is set in a villa above Vicenza, near Venice, and opens with an architectural description made striking by a religious metaphor: "Have you ever questioned the long shuttered front of an old Italian house, that motionless mask, smooth, mute, equivocal as the face of a priest behind which buzz the secrets of the confessional?" (234) This might be the opening of "The Fall of the House of Usher" where the distorted reflections of the castle in the tarn anticipate the distortions of

perception and behaviour inside. In "The Duchess at Prayer," a title which signals both Italian history and religion, the narrator is taken into the Duchess's apartments by an old man and is confronted with a painting on the chimney panel:

> "Duke Ercole II," the old man explained, "by the Genoese Priest."
> It was a narrow-browed face, sallow as a wax effigy, high-nosed and cautious-lidded, as though modelled by priestly hands. (236)

19 The sinister images continue as the visitor enters first the bedroom of the "Duchess Violante," with its "yellow Christ agonized between the curtains" (236), and then a chapel in which "pictures of bituminous saints mouldered between the pilasters" (236). The succession of images concludes with the figure of the Duchess by "the Cavaliere Bernini" with a face that is "a frozen horror" (237). It is shocking. "Never have hate, revolt and agony so possessed a human countenance" (237). The tale belongs to a long tradition of narratives in which changing art is used to convey horror, from the portrait in Bram Stoker's "The Judge's House" (1891) to Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Unlike the ageing portrait of Mrs. Grancy in "The Moving Finger" (1901), a story partly set in Rome and one in which a painting seems to change supernaturally but is actually repainted by the artist Claydon, there is more than a suggestion of the occult in "The Duchess at Prayer." The face on the statue of the Duchess became contorted *after* it was placed in the chapel by the Duke to cover access to the crypt, which was the trysting place for the Duchess and her cousin, and where the Duchess's lover has been entombed alive. Here, religious settings, religious images and religious figures (notably the chaplain, who develops a hatred for the Duchess, spies on her and betrays her infidelity to the Duke) are grotesque agents of control, thwarting transgressive desires. The Duchess's name signals that transgression, the Italian word meaning "violate, break, outrage, defile, infringe." Yet religion has also been used by the Duchess, who seeks to disguise sexual desire in the trappings of piety. It is not just her name that suggests that she is the victim in this story. The Duke abandons her for long periods, and shows no sign of affection for her.

20 Italy continues to appear in Wharton's fiction during her final decade. "A Glimpse," published in *The Saturday Evening Post* in 1932 is set in Venice and explores a situation in which a lovers' relationship is complicated by rivalry in art, as seen through the eyes of a visiting American. "Roman Fever" was originally published in the magazine *Liberty* in 1934 and in the collection *The World Over* in 1936, only a year before Wharton's death. Much anthologised, it is a poignant story of two mature widows with a shared Old New York background who have accompanied their daughters to Rome, and while the young women go out in the company of eligible young men, the mothers spend an afternoon looking out over the Forum. Both women are of "ripe but well cared-for middle age" (749), and when they find themselves in the same hotel in Rome the "similarity of their lot" again draws them together (752). One of them, Grace Ansley, is stolid and knits, but has a vibrant daughter in Babs. The other, Alida Slade, was admired for her beauty, and was married to a famous corporation lawyer, but to her disappointment ("I always wanted a brilliant daughter" [755]) her Jenny is pretty but "safe" (753). The antipathy which Mrs. Slade feels for Grace Ansley has much deeper roots, however, for it transpires that Alida had feared her as a rival when Alida was engaged to Delphin and discovered that her fiancé was loved by Grace. Alida plotted the other woman's downfall by sending a letter as if from Delphin, luring Grace to a secret tryst in the Colosseum, where she hoped Grace would contract a mild form of "roman fever" which in fact she did. But there is a ferocious twist, when Grace reveals that Delphin was

indeed there to meet her, because she had replied to "his" letter and Babs, conceived that night in the Colosseum, was *Delphin's* daughter.

21 In the short stories of Edith Wharton, Italy carries many meanings, and is both an important setting and symbol. In a comment which shows how Fussell's point about travel writing also applies to fiction, Virginia Ricard has noted that Italy is a place where travellers, particularly American travellers, can act outside the social conventions and restraints of their own society (73). For women, ironically and paradoxically, it is also shown to be a place of entrapment and confinement, a theme explored by Wharton in all of her fiction, but shown more bluntly in the narrative context of Italian social practices in earlier centuries. Her pre-World War I Italian short stories reveal more undisguised repression than any of her Old New York stories, where exclusion rather than imprisonment is the effective means of ensuring the social control and the conformity of women.

22 Love of art, of tradition, and public representations of both carnal and spiritual desire, none of which Wharton found in the United States, was satisfied by Italy and is clearly traceable in her Italian short fiction. Ultimately Wharton seems to have submitted to the dark and somewhat frightening mysticism of the cardinals and priests, figures which had fascinated her in *The Valley of Decision*. In his biography of Wharton, R.W.B. Lewis argued that her 1932 visit to Rome differed from all the others, because Wharton, who had previously been captivated by Christian art, architecture, spectacle and history, began to "interest herself strongly in the rituals and ceremonies, in the liturgical experience of the Christian religion, and in the meanings they exemplified" (509). Hermione Lee is more circumspect, arguing that Wharton's attraction to Catholicism "was aesthetic as much as devotional" (714). Even though at the end of *The Gods Arrive* Vance immerses himself in St Augustine, Lee argues that we should give more attention to the aesthetic than the spiritual because her final short stories are pagan rather than orthodox in their religion, and concerned with the haunting of the present by the past. But as the last of these stories, "All Souls'," shows, these narratives are concerned with the possibility of a visitation by a spirit, even if the All Souls Eve vigil takes place in Connecticut. Published posthumously in a collection called *Ghosts,* this and other stories of the supernatural world do indeed engage with the uncanny and with those spiritual presences found alike in Colosseum, church and New England gothic house.

23 The lure of Italy in Wharton's final years suggests the triumph of sentiment over scientific materialism. It is anticipated by her fascination with the genre of the ghost story, where the hidden world seems to goad science into an explanation. In the rhetoric of both the Italian short fiction and the ghost stories there is the thrill that Wharton also found in the mysteries of Catholic ritual. It is perhaps unsurprising that as the death of those around her encouraged Wharton to reflect on her own mortality, Italian Catholic ritual triumphed over the ephemeral material world exemplified by America. Wharton's final years may have been spent in the congenially intellectual environment of France where she had chosen to live and own property, but for this restless wanderer, on the move throughout her life, Italy provided a spiritual home.

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NOTES

1. This was unpublished in her lifetime. See Lewis 544-548.
2. In the first essay in *Italian Backgrounds* (1905) Wharton stresses the importance of the hinterland in Italian paintings.
3. Edith Wharton to Margaret Terry Chanler (“Daisy’) 8 Mar. 1903. *Letters.* 1989: 77-78.
4. Although the dominant attitude, there were exceptions. See E. M. Forster’s *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905), for example. Some consider Wharton to be one of those exceptions. See, for example, Ricard (70).
5. For a discussion of Wharton’s relationship with modernism, see my *Apart from Modernism*.

ABSTRACTS

Plus Edith Wharton avance en âge, plus son écriture est caractérisée par le scepticisme scientifique et par l’observation minutieuse de la société. Cet article montre que Wharton ne s’est pourtant jamais départie de sa fascination à l’égard de l’invisible, même si la ferveur religieuse de son enfance s’affaiblit peu à peu, avant de disparaître complètement à l’âge adulte. Cette fascination se manifeste dans les nouvelles italiennes, qui explorent la tension entre rationalisme et religiosité. Le questionnement concernant le statut de l’âme, omniprésent dans ces nouvelles, permet de mieux comprendre le goût de Wharton pour les histoires de fantômes, ainsi que son évolution vers le catholicisme pendant les dernières années de sa vie. Si cette évolution s’explique en partie par son attirance pour le rituel, elle exprime aussi l’intérêt de Wharton pour l’existence de l’âme et la possibilité de la révélation.

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